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Discerning a future, leaving a legacy

“What are we doing? Are we acting like believers or thinking of ourselves?”

Those were the questions that members of Ascension, a small neighborhood church

in Glendale, Queens, had to ask during a time of discernment. Over a ten year period, the congregation was served by four part-time and quarter-time pastors. Ascension had strong, active leaders, but a membership of not more than 15-20, no growth, and simply not enough money. At first, council members considered just using up the remaining money before finally closing the church. “In the beginning, we thought that would be the way to go,” said Elaine Schueler, a lifetime member of Ascension. “Then we thought about it. Taking our legacy with us was a better idea than to close our doors and turn off the lights. That would have been just too sad.”

Ascension sat less than a mile away from Trinity Lutheran Church in Middle Village. While the two congregations had very distinct identities, they also had a history of shared ministries stretching back 30 years. More recently, Pastor Leo Longan of Trinity had served as Ascension’s vacancy pastor during their times of transition. Realizing they were in a period of irreversible decline, Ascension members approached Pr. Longan and asked to talk about merging the two congregations. “It was a lot of praying and tears shed, a lot of talking,” said Schueler. “When we went to Trinity—the reception we received—we all thought that was truly where we should be in that point in our lives. This is what God wants us to do.”



PHOTO BY BOB WILLIAMS

Since Trinity, with a membership of 200, has a facility on a bus route, a gym, and reasonable parking, it made sense to sell the Glendale property. The merger process took about a year. A joint committee wrote a mission plan describing the strengths of two congregations becoming one. The plan was shared with both congregational councils and our synod’s Mission Strategy Table. Votes were taken, certified, and filed; the legal matters were completed by January 2011. The merger provided that three members of Trinity’s council resigned and three Ascension members came on board to create a joint council.



Welcome service at Trinity, Middle Village

PHOTO BY BOB WILLIAMS

For a while, worship continued in Ascension’s sanctuary until the congregation felt comfortable moving. “We didn’t want to be abrupt,” said Pr. Longan. “These are lifelong members whose names are etched

on the windows.” A church bus was purchased to transport Glendale residents and shut-ins. On June 12, the two-become-one congregation held a final festival service of Holy Communion at Ascension before heading over to Trinity for a service of welcome and a gala luncheon.

“They are just wonderful people, such good church people,” said Pr. Longan of the twelve Ascension members who joined Trinity. “They know what ministry is about. They are willing to work and have worked amazingly hard. The process was always focused on the gospel, not the worship of their building.”

The eventual sale of Ascension’s building will contribute greatly to Trinity’s ongoing parish hall renovation. When the \$1.8 million dollar project is complete—with wiring, plumbing, elevators, and offices brought up to code—it will allow the congregation of Trinity to relate to their community in a completely new way. And the refurbished building will be named Ascension Hall. + SARAH GIOE is Director of Communication and Interpretation.

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